

## APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

### 2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Montana Legal Services Association

Application ID: 14AC157200

Program Name: Justice for Montana Project

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

#### Reviewers' Summary Comments:

##### Strengths:

The applicant provided acceptable data to support the need for legal services and knowledge in the communities served in the State of Montana.

The applicant provided acceptable statistics that support the community need for legal services, citing American Bar Association data on state lawyer client ratios above and below the poverty line and U.S. Census local poverty statistics.

The applicant provides relevant data from reputable sources identifying the prevalence of poverty in the state, as well as the prevalence of civil legal needs of low-income households in Montana.

The applicant provides a solid context for needed legal services by low and moderate income residents of Montana. This is achieved by comparing the caseload capacity of the statewide provider of free civil legal assistance with the statewide need. This comparison identifies a gap between the number of households living in poverty who have a civil legal need and the free and low cost civil legal assistance available to them.

The applicant clearly demonstrated that they have met and exceeded their performance targets. For example, in the last three grant cycles, the project has been able to increase the number of people served by 65% from 2010-2011. Plus, the applicant reported recruiting over twice as many volunteers as proposed in the 2010-2011 grant year, and twice as many people had access to justice services. There is a clear need in the communities served.

The applicant clearly demonstrated the need for legal services in the state by stating that in 2012-2013, the campaign reached six times the number of proposed people requiring legal services knowledge.

The applicant references a need for legal services by 77% of survey participants. Of those households, 67% have more than one civil legal problem per year, as evidenced by the 2010 Montana Legal Needs Survey Final Report.

The applicant stated that Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA) is the only statewide organization providing free legal services to the 182,000 residents in the state that live at or below 125% of the poverty line according to the 2010 U.S. Census. There is only one attorney to support every 14, 000 people in poverty in that state therefore there is a definite need.

The applicant reported that the 5-year American Community Survey (2007-2011), used by the U.S. Census Bureau, found that 14.3% of Montanans are living below the federal poverty level of \$23,550 for a family of four. The applicant cites evidence that higher poverty rates lie within rural counties, such as Glacier County, Big Horn County and Blaine County. From the studies provided, evidence is clear that people in poverty have less legal resources; therefore the need is apparent.

The applicant presents a well-documented need for knowledge and legal services by low and moderate income persons who cannot otherwise afford them.

The applicant presents a clear plan of implementation.

The applicant provides evidence to support its methodological design by citing one recent national study focusing on the effectiveness of legal advice and information given by telephone.

The applicant provides evidence to support its design by citing a recent study of the effectiveness of telephone based legal assistance in Pennsylvania.

The applicant cited the 2012 Assessment of Telephone Based Legal Assistance study, which provided significant results in assisting people to solve their civil legal problems in Pennsylvania.

The applicant provides data from its own recent success in reaching Montanans statewide, providing them with legal guidance resources and information via a separate project.

The applicant referenced a 2006 Legal Hotlines Outcomes Study that concluded that providing information to low income people with legal problems and taking an action step to solve their program was beneficial to the majority of callers. Those callers reported a positive change as the result of the legal action.

The applicant and their partners have exceeded their targets in all measures over the last three program cycles.

The applicant has demonstrated success in all previously similar AmeriCorps programs it has conducted.

The applicant has demonstrated an ability to develop and maintain strong partnerships with other private and public organizations.

The applicant has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing the legal needs of low and moderate income households in Montana through three years of AmeriCorps programming. The applicant collects feedback from program participants each year and utilizes results to improve the way in which it meets the legal guidance needs of Montana residents the next programmatic year.

The applicant reported that the number of people receiving services doubled and that the percentage of those who received AmeriCorps legal services felt better equipped to handle their legal issues. This exceeded the proposed percentage of 60% by 4%.

The applicant provided an example of exceeding a proposed goal of serving 300 people through three consumer awareness campaigns by conducting four campaigns and serving six times the proposed number of people. According to that same survey, 61% of the survey respondents reported increased knowledge about consumer legal issues, when the grantee had proposed only 50% of survey respondents would report an increase.

The applicant reported that in 2012-2013, MLSA delivered project resources to 17,029 people statewide — an increase from the proposed number of people served.

#### Weaknesses:

Although the applicant provides 2010 Census data for the prevalence of poverty within the State of Montana, references to “low” and “moderate” income levels remain unclear and undefined.

Applicant included moderately impoverished Montanans as the target population, but does not describe this population according to local or state data. This fact also questions the modified or similar service delivery with this intended target population compared to those close in poverty.

The applicant proposes web-based, telephone-based and circuit ride-based legal guidance to low and moderate-income residents of Montana. However, without knowing the prevalence of poverty within these geographic boundaries, it is difficult to assess the circuit ride-based need of the six Member site areas selected.

Applicant cites an approximate cost of \$150-\$300 per hour to obtain legal representation in the state without citing a data source.

It is unclear if AmeriCorps members will be placed in locations where the need is prevalent and severe because they do not provide county specific data.

There is insufficient evidence to determine the cause and effect of past Applicant programs or of the currently proposed program.

The applicant does not provide enough information to link the cause and effect of this program.

Some of the applicant’s survey questions are written in a non-objective form, making it difficult to determine the program participants’ impartial view of impact.

The applicant provided similar evidence from a state that had different cultural, linguistic, transportation and poverty demographics. For example, the applicant references Pennsylvania in the application, which has metropolitan and urban areas that Montana does not, therefore the applicant cannot make comparable conclusions about the effectiveness of such a program in Montana.

One of the non-experimental studies cited as evidence occurred in 2006 making it more than six years old.

It is unclear if the persons served in previous programs were low or moderate income and whether the individuals served were the same or different persons.

The applicant does not provide enough information to determine if the target population of the current program is the same or different than the target population of previous studies cited, whether conducted by the Applicant or by other organizations.

In reporting past performance, the applicant reported numbers of people served and not outcomes specifically. For example, the applicant cited a study that concluded that providing information to low income people was beneficial to the majority of callers, and that the caller reported a change for the better as the result of the legal intervention but did not cite specific data.

The applicant does not include short-term or long-term outcomes other than survey reports from previous clients.